

## MARTHA CAREY THOMAS, 1857-1935

### Feminist and Pioneer Educator

KATHRYN ALLAMONG JACOB

If ever I live and grow up, my one aim and concentrated purpose shall be and is to show that women can learn, can reason, can compete with men in the grand fields of literature and science and conjecture... that a woman can be a woman, and a true one, without having all her time engrossed in dress and society.

So wrote precocious Martha Carey Thomas in her diary at the age of fourteen in 1871. Unlike most childish resolutions, this one was kept. In the years that followed, the name of M. Carey Thomas became synonymous with outstanding scholarship and the "new woman" who demanded broader educational opportunities.

The oldest of ten children, M. Carey Thomas was born into a family of prominent Baltimore Quakers. The men in the family regarded women as their spiritual and mental equals. The women of the family, like Carey's aunt, Hannah Whitall Smith, the Quaker preacher and writer, and her self-educated mother, Mary Whitall Thomas, merited the men's respect.

At age three, Carey was clamoring to learn how to read. But her mother, having read the warnings of the dire consequences of too much early intellectual stimulation, was reluctant to teach her. For the time being, Carey had to be content with hearing the classics and English poetry read to her by her father, who was a doctor.

In the mid-1860's, Carey attended a local dame's school where only she and one other little girl argued for the North in the heated debates over the Civil War. Carey pasted up pictures of Lincoln from her seemingly inexhaustible supply as fast as her schoolmates destroyed them.

As she grew older and the years of schooling thought appropriate for young ladies came to an end, Carey Thomas grew jealous of the opportunities stretching before her brothers. In reply to a sermon arguing that God had created women to be wives and mothers, Carey indignantly inscribed in her diary, "Stuff! Nonsense!" The arguments that women's brains were smaller than men's, proving their inferiority, only increased her frustration:

One thing I am determined on is that by the time I die my brain shall weigh as much as any man's if study and learning can make it so. ...

In later years, as president of Bryn Mawr College, she found herself battling the same arguments and sought to quiet her critics by replying:

One man's mind differs from another man's mind far more widely than all women's minds differ from all men's.

Carey and her best friend and cousin, Bessie King, later Elizabeth King Endicott, began to dream of being doctors. Carey's father let them use a

corner of his laboratory for makeshift experiments. According to Carey's plans for their future:

We would devote ourselves to study, live together, have a library with all the splendid books with a bright fire always burning, dark crimson curtains and furniture, and great big easy chairs where we could sit lost in books for days . . . , adjoining this should be a laboratory where far into the night we would pour over crucibles. . . .

All who passed should say 'their example arouses me, their books ennoble me, their deeds inspire me, and behold they are women!'

In 1872, Carey and Bessie persuaded their fathers to allow them to attend the newly opened Howland Institute for Girls in New York. The school's catalogue promised sound, hard work, and no frills.

While studying in New York, Carey's father asked her to investigate Cornell University for him. He had recently been named a trustee of the new Johns Hopkins University and was interested in the mechanics of the older institution. From his point of view, sending Carey to see Cornell was a mistake. It had recently opened its doors to women in 1868 and, as soon as she saw it, Carey was determined to attend.

Despite his public expressions of approval for education for women, Dr. Thomas did not approve of Carey going to a real college and a coeducational one at that. Nevertheless, he finally relented. Carey Thomas received her bachelor's degree from Cornell in 1877. Eighteen years later, she became the first woman trustee of that university.

At Cornell, her appetite for scholarship had been whetted; she was determined to continue. While Carey was studying in New York, her mother had written, "They had the woman question up at the Johns Hopkins University Board the other day \_\_\_\_" Carey's father and several of her uncles and cousins on the Board supported the plan for the admission of women to the new university but Daniel Gilman, the University's first president, and several other trustees did not. While refusing to admit women as a general policy, the Board decided to consider each female applicant separately.

The stage was set for Carey's challenge. In the fall of 1877, she noted in her diary, "I made application to the Johns Hopkins University to study for a degree." She was qualified. She was related to half of the members of the board of trustees. Finally, she was reluctantly admitted for a master's degree in the classics—the first woman to enter a Hopkins graduate course.

Carey's admission to Hopkins was qualified by the phrase "without class attendance." She could not attend lectures but could be tutored privately and infrequently by a few willing professors. According to one Hopkins legend, a sympathetic Greek professor permitted her to come to his class provided she sat behind a screen so as not to distract the male students.

Her enthusiasm for Hopkins quickly waned. Though she found her studies stimulating and passed her first year examinations, Carey missed the classroom. When informed that she would be excluded from classes for a second year, she went home and wrote a letter of withdrawal, "rejecting the crumbs." Forty years later, she would become the first woman to receive an honorary degree from Johns Hopkins.

After leaving Hopkins, Carey began to consider studying in Germany where she had heard that women actively participated in classes. Again her father's objections were overcome, and, in July of 1879, she and her Baltimore friend Mamie Gwinn departed for the University of Leipzig. Upon their arrival, they took up a Spartan existence, living in cold rented rooms and eating out of "tins," and plunged into the lectures at the University—all conducted in German, of course.

While in Leipzig, Carey's resolve to be a scholarly writer began to dissolve as had her earlier dream of being a doctor. Though she spoke eloquently, her words lost their fire when written on paper. She began to worry about her future. How could she better women's lot if she couldn't be heard?

Though these worries troubled her, other problems became more immediate. Though she completed all the requirements for the doctorate, the University of Leipzig refused to grant her a degree because of her gender. After another year at Göttingen, the verdict was the same. Chancellor Bismarck had forbidden any German university to grant the doctorate degree to women.

In the summer of 1883, Carey transferred to the University of Zürich in Switzerland. Besides writing a dissertation, she had to pass a three-day written test and a three-hour oral examination, all in German, to qualify for the Ph.D. in German philology. She appeared for her orals in full evening dress to emphasize the special significance the event held for her. After much deliberation, the board of examiners awarded her the Ph.D. *summa cum laude*, an unprecedented accomplishment. Only one other woman before her had received a doctorate of any sort from Zürich.

Feminists from all over the world wired their congratulations. Susan B. Anthony, the great suffrage leader, met Carey in Paris to tell her that her triumph was a victory for all women.

While in Europe, Carey heard news of the proposed women's college at Bryn Mawr founded by a bequest by Dr. Joseph Taylor, a Quaker physician and businessman. Carey had long dreamed of an American women's college with the highest of standards and saw great potential for just such a school in the embryonic Bryn Mawr. She had considered applying for a teaching position at Bryn Mawr but, after her Zürich triumph, she boldly wrote to apply for the presidency. She was twenty-seven. In proposing herself for the job, Carey wrote that her appointment "would give the college an éclat which the nomination of a totally unknown man could not."

The trustees of Bryn Mawr seriously considered her proposal. She was a Quaker and epitomized the educational values they hoped to provide for American women. She was also very young and totally lacking in administrative experience. In 1884, they chose Dr. James Rhoads as the College's first president and M. Carey Thomas as Dean of the College and first Professor of English.

One of Carey's first tasks as Dean was to travel to the existing women's colleges where she closely examined everything from salaries to classroom

furniture. Though he had opposed her work at his own university, Daniel Gilman proved most willing to help her establish Bryn Mawr. From him, Carey gleaned the advice that no professor should be appointed whose usefulness in ten years was likely to be less than at the beginning of his career, since he would be difficult to get rid of.

Dr. Rhoads' thoughtful reasoning complemented Carey's hot zeal. Both were intensely interested in advancing women's education. Carey passionately believed that entrance requirements must be as rigid and as demanding as those in the best men's institutions. She argued with Dr. Rhoads and the Trustees that, "It is useless to have excellent professors if the students still need schoolmasters\_\_\_\_" She won her case, and the resulting Bryn Mawr examinations, patterned after those at Harvard, became the standard against which secondary school girls measured excellence.

Dean Thomas also fought for and won resident and European fellowships, the first offered to women in the United States, and she favored the "group system" of major and minor subjects patterned after Daniel Gilman's plan at Hopkins. She argued for voluntary attendance at lectures, believing that women would be eager to attend, and if they weren't, they didn't belong at Bryn Mawr. Most important, due to Carey Thomas' labor, when Bryn Mawr opened in 1885, it contained the first graduate school at a women's college.

Though very busy with her work at Bryn Mawr, Carey Thomas often returned to Baltimore to work on projects dear to her. In their youth, she, Mary Garrett, Bessie King, Julia Rogers and Mamie Gwinn had felt the need for a school at which girls could obtain an education which would prepare them for a good college. With the founding of Bryn Mawr College, an institution worthy of such preparation, they put their plans into action.

Carey and Mary Garrett, who would later move to Bryn Mawr and share the Deanery with Carey, assumed leadership of the project which culminated in the opening of the Bryn Mawr School for Girls in Baltimore in 1885. Carey served as treasurer and then as chairman of the school's corporation until 1927 when she retired and gave the school \$100,000 to pay off its accumulated debts.

These same five women soon launched another revolutionary project. They saw in Johns Hopkins University's financial struggle to open its Medical School a chance to open another door to women. If they raised the necessary funds, they reasoned, the University would have to accept them on the women's terms—a little respectable bribery.

Within a year, they had raised \$100,000 in the name of the Women's Medical Memorial Fund. When Mary Garrett's great generosity raised the total to nearly \$500,000, the women were ready to make their move. Though the majority of the University's Trustees did not want women in their Medical School, they realized that it was unlikely that such an amount of money could be obtained elsewhere. They reluctantly agreed to the terms: women would be admitted to the new Medical School on precisely the same basis as men. Thus, thanks largely to the efforts of these five women, there were

three women among the first class to enter the Johns Hopkins Medical School in the fall of 1893.

Even though Carey Thomas had taken on most of Dr. Rhoads' work, the Trustees of Bryn Mawr were reluctant to name her his successor when he retired in 1893. However, like most others in her life, this obstacle was overcome. On August 31, by a majority of only one vote, at age thirty-six, Carey Thomas was elected the second president of Bryn Mawr College. The theme of her inaugural address was the need to keep the college an intellectual focal point for serious young women.

From 1894 until her retirement in 1922, Carey Thomas presided over the College with a strong hand. Her personality was magnetic and intense but also partisan and autocratic. Thus, she invited profound adoration and deep mistrust; no one was neutral about her. She was motivated by enthusiasm, not tact. During her presidency, she weathered much criticism from Bryn Mawr's faculty and trustees but almost never from the students.

Anecdotes about her imperious personality abound. During World War I, a government inspector visited the College to see if bacon was still being served. Finding that it was, he ordered the practice stopped only to be overridden by President Thomas, who tartly explained, "Superior women need superior food."

Through Mary Garrett, Carey Thomas was drawn into the Suffrage Movement. She became the first women's college president to publicly advocate suffrage for women. She also served as president of the National College Equal Suffrage League and organized its Baltimore chapter.

Her suffrage work sparked her concern for social questions. The result was the founding of Bryn Mawr's Carola Woerishoff Graduate School of Social Economy and Social Research, the first of its kind in the country, in 1915, and the Summer School for Women Workers in Industry in 1920.

Carey Thomas was also one of the founders of the Association to Promote Scientific Research by Women and of the International Federation of University Women. In 1920, she worked tirelessly to help American women purchase a grain of radium for the experiments of Mme. Marie Curie.

After serving the College for thirty-seven years, President Thomas retired in 1922. Shortly before her retirement, she gave the Deanery and all of the painting, furniture and souvenirs that she and Mary Garrett had accumulated on their travels to the College Alumnae Association to use as a lodge.

Unexpectedly, on December 2, 1935, M. Carey Thomas died in Philadelphia. Only weeks before, she had watched Bryn Mawr celebrate its fiftieth birthday, an event which was a testimony to her determination and belief in quality women's education. Despite the dozens of awards and honorary degrees bestowed upon her, no other celebration had meant so much to her. Throughout her life, she had stood out as a pioneering example to the many able and restless young women of the times. Her own career was shining proof of the ideals in which she believed and lived to see vindicated.

### *Brief Bibliography*

Edith Finch's *Carey Thomas of Bryn Mawr* (1947) is the standard biography which is unusually perceptive and penetrating when dealing with her early years but becomes apologetic when discussing her years as president of the college. Her administration is better handled in Cornelia L. Meigs' history of Bryn Mawr, *What Makes a College?* (1956). Several vivid reminiscences about Carey Thomas can be found in *Unforgotten Years* (1938), written by her cousin, Logan Pearsall Smith. A brief but useful biography also appears in Margie Lockett's *Maryland Women*, Vol. I (1931).

Among Carey Thomas' most useful articles and addresses are: "A Letter from Leipzig," *Alumnus* (Philadelphia), March, 1880; "Address" in *Celebration of the Quarter-Centenary of Smith College* (1900); *The College Women of the Present and Future* (speech, 1901); "Should the Higher Education of Women Differ from that of Men?" *Educational Review*, January, 1901; "The College," *ibid.*, January, 1905; "Present Tendencies in Women's College and University Education," *ibid.*, January, 1908. In addition, a number of articles by and about President Thomas appear in the *Bryn Mawr Alumnae Quarterly* (1907-1920), and the *Alumnae Bulletin* (since 1921).

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# Notable *Maryland* Women



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